DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 322 826 HE 023 755

AUTHOR Kole, James P.
TITLE The Development of "De-Isolation" Strategies for Nova University Programs for Higher Education Regional Cluster Students.
PUB DATE Jan 87
NOTE 61p.; For a related document, see HE 023 743.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Dissertations/Theses - Practicum Papers (043)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cluster Colleges; College Students; Doctoral Programs; External Degree Programs; Higher Education; *Needs Assessment; *Out of State Students; *Postsecondary Education as a Field of Study; Student Adjustment; *Student Alienation; *Student Attitudes; *Student College Relationship; Student Welfare; Surveys
IDENTIFIERS Need Assessment Questionnaire; *Nova University FL

ABSTRACT

An investigation was conducted to develop isolation reduction strategies to reduce the feeling of isolation expressed by many of the Nova University Programs for Higher Education regional cluster students. A needs assessment was initiated to discover what the broad-range needs of regional students were and to actively develop strategies to meet those needs. A needs assessment was also conducted among the South Florida local cluster students to determine if their feelings of isolation were the same. A content analysis of the regional cluster survey results revealed that a majority of the regional students did experience feelings of isolation. The main area of concern was the general communication gaps between students, faculty, research associates, practicum advisors, Nova Central staff, cluster coordinator, etc. The local cluster survey had too low a response rate to develop alternative recommendations; however, the regional cluster survey was adequate enough to develop the following recommendations: (1) Increase regional cluster communications system-wide; (2) provide more detailed program information; and (3) organize Programs for Higher Education regional information into an "Orientation Manual." Contains 9 references. (GLR)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF "DE-ISOLATION" STRATEGIES FOR NOVA UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION REGIONAL CLUSTER STUDENTS

by

James P. Kole

Nova University

HE 023 755

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A Practicum presented to Nova University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

Nova University

January, 1987

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this investigation was to develop "de-isolation" strategies to reduce the feeling of isolation expressed by many of the Nova University Programs for Higher Education regional cluster students. After discussions with regional students and the regional cluster coordinator, the Programs for Higher Education administrators recognized a need to initiate a needs assessment of all regional cluster students in the doctoral program. The goal was to discover what the broad-ranging needs of regional students were and to actively develop strategies to meet those needs.

In order to accomplish the purposes of the investigation, a regional student needs assessment was conducted and related national literature was reviewed. A needs assessment was also conducted among the South Florida local cluster students to determine if they had similar feelings of isolation. The surveys sent to both the regional cluster and the local cluster students were identical except for the words "regional" and "local" that described their respective cluster (See Appendix B and Appendix D).

A content analysis of the survey results of the regional cluster students indicated that feelings of isolation existed among a majority of the students. The main area of concern was the general communication gaps between

students, faculty, research associate, practicum advisors, Nova Central staff, cluster coordinator, etc. A review of student comments from the "Regional Cluster De-Isolation Project Survey" resulted in a list of recommendations for immediate and future implementation. The general categories of recommendations were:

1. Increase regional cluster communication system-wide.
2. Provide more detailed program information and
3. Organize Programs for Higher Education regional information into an "Orientation Manual."

The results of the "Local Cluster De-Isolation Project Survey" were not conclusive due to the low response rate. However, a need for more detailed program (Ed.D.) information i.e., sample practicums, etc. was indicated.

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

In April of 1985 Nova University Programs for Higher Education administrators initiated the Program's first field-based regional cluster delivery system. This was in addition to the already established nationwide system of local cluster delivery systems. Although the local clusters provided an ideal educational opportunity for many professionals, others could not participate because of location or employment considerations.

The first regional cluster location site was Denver, Colorado. The students who attended the initial Ed.D. regional cluster orientation meeting came from various locations across the country. A sample of the states represented included: Idaho, Las Vegas, Minnesota, Missouri, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, Wisconsin, etc.

The overall meeting plan for the first regional cluster included the orientation meeting in Denver, Colorado, three weeks of classes in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and a week-long attendance at the 1985 Summer Institute in Tucson, Arizona; the second year involved two Saturday classes in Denver, Colorado, two weeks of classes in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and a week-long attendance at the 1986 Summer

Institute in the same city. The apparent problem with the above meeting schedule for regional students was the lack of regular communication throughout the year which may be related to their feelings of isolation. The regional cluster is unlike local clusters that usually meet nine or more times during the year, thus providing more program continuity and allowing numerous opportunities for discourse between students, lecturers, research associate, cluster coordinator, etc. Since many local cluster students live relatively close to each other, there is more probability for informal program-related discussions to occur, either in person or telephonically than there is for regional students. In addition, special help sessions are sometimes arranged to review practicums and Major Applied Research Projects (MARPs) completed by local cluster students. Finally, local cluster students usually have access to a local cluster library whereas the regional cluster student does not have that option.

Purpose of the Investigation

Nova University Programs for Higher Education has offered field-based doctoral study for working professionals since 1972. The first method that Nova University employed to operationalize the offering of the field-based doctoral program was the local cluster concept described above. Because Nova University was accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and because the

field-based doctoral program met the needs of many working professionals--enrollments swelled. The success of the local cluster concept did not stop Programs for Higher Education administrators from being innovative. In April of 1985, the regional cluster concept, also described above, was initiated. After a year and a half, regional cluster enrollment continued to climb. Along with the rise in regional student enrollment was the feeling of isolation by many of these students. Regional students communicated their feeling of isolation to their cluster coordinator, central staff and each other. Therefore, the purpose of this investigation was to determine what the regional students' needs were and to develop de-isolation strategies to meet those needs.

Method of Investigation

In order to determine if a large percentage of regional students felt isolated because of the vast geographical distance from their peers, instructors, research associate, cluster coordinator, etc.--a cover letter and survey was developed and sent to all regional students in August of 1986 (See Appendix A and Appendix B). In addition, to determine if there might be similar feelings of isolation, the South Florida local cluster was also surveyed in November of 1986 (See Appendix C and Appendix D). A review of the literature on non-traditional education, external degree programs, and long distance learning was conducted and the

summative findings were incorporated into the preliminary de-isolation strategies (See Appendix A).

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Overview of Nova's Field-Based Ed.D. Programs

The Programs for Higher Education of Nova University initiated its first field-based doctoral programs for practitioners working in community colleges in 1972. Over the past fourteen years, Nova University's field-based doctoral program has evolved to include practitioners working in higher education, vocational education, and adult education (including business, industrial, and military training programs). The program integrates formal instruction, independent study, and applied research into a comprehensive learning experience.

The primary method of educational delivery for the Programs for Higher Education Ed.D. degree is the local cluster. Local clusters are described in the Nova University Programs for Higher Education 1986-87 Catalog (2)

> In the Programs for Higher Education, the cluster replaces the campus. All students are organized into groups called local or regional clusters. Clusters provide the vehicle through which instruction and other services are provided to students. All students belong to a cluster, and all clusters are headed by a cluster coordinator, who is a part-time representative of Nova University. . . . During the first two nine-month academic years, for local clusters, formal instruction covers five of seven required seminars. The two specialization seminars are held in conjunction with the summer institutes. National lecturers travel to the local cluster for core seminar meetings. The cluster coordinators coordinate these activities with the national lecturers and the students.

> Members of a local cluster are generally from the same geographic area and may have the same employer. They share similar professional concerns and goals and often must deal with similar problems. Thus, local clusters usually gel into closely-knit social-educational-professional groups that students often find sources of support, guidance, and inspiration. Many rewarding personal and professional relationships are formed during the life of a cluster.
>
> A local cluster may form almost anywhere there is enough interest. Generally, 20 or more students are needed to form a cluster. Clusters are now operating throughout the United States.

Noted in the definition of local cluster above is the idea that students in local clusters utilize each other as sources of support, guidance, and inspiration. The description of regional clusters in the same catalog does not suggest that regional students provide the support, guidance, and inspiration for each other as is apparent in the local clusters. Regional clusters are described in the Nova University Programs for Higher Education 1986-87 Catalog (3) as being

> developed specifically for those students who, because of location or employment considerations, are unable to participate in local cluster programs. Regional clusters have been designed to enable students to complete all requirements for the Ed.D. degree without taking extensive leave from their positions of employment.
>
> Regional clusters employ a combination of field-based delivery, independent study, and on-campus formal instruction. The program components include a minimum of three regional cluster meetings, two on-campus summer sessions and two summer institutes. In addition to an introductory meeting in the winter . . . one regional cluster meeting is scheduled the next year at each of the operational regional cluster sites. On-campus summer sessions will be held at the Nova University main campus in Fort Lauderdale, Florida . . .

A comparison of the above two cluster descriptions (local and regional) should lend some insight into the possible and probable communication problems encountered by regional students. The same comparison will give credence to the notion of the feeling of isolation that many regional students express. In order to more fully understand the concerns of the Nova University Programs for Higher Education regional students, it was imperative to first explore the commonly agreed upon precepts regarding adults as learners.

Adults as Learners

All of the students enrolled in the Nova University Programs for Higher Education field-based doctoral program are adult learners. But what is an adult learner? According to Cross (1984:79), the adult learner population can be visualized as a "pyramid of learners." Cross (1984:79) further states that the base of the pyramid is made up of learners that are self-directed. The middle of the pyramid contains those adults who participate in organized instruction, and the top of the pyramid, the smallest part, contains adults who enroll in college courses for credit. The Nova University Programs for Higher Education regional students would obviously fit at the top of the pyramid. As such, Cross, (1984:77) reasoned that "older and more mature learners are somewhat more likely than younger, less well-established adults to select a program that departs from the traditional." One reason for this may be the fact that

older learners are established with full-time jobs and families and do not have the option to pursue the more traditional full-time education programs.

The External Degree

According to Houle (1977:14-15),

> an external degree is one awarded to an individual on the basis of some program of preparation (devised either by himself or by an educational institution) which is not centered on traditional patterns of residential college or university study.

The Nova University Programs for Higher Education field-based doctoral degree program fits the definition of the external degree. Samuel Gould, Chairman, Commission on Non-Traditional Study (Houle, 1977:xi) states that "more rather than less rigor is demanded of the external degree student; more rather than less initiative is expected;" and he insists that a great deal of motivation is required. Felix and Aker (1982:6) expand on the importance of motivation for field-based learners by acknowledging that "while motivation is extremely complex and imperfectly understood, it is best seen within the framework of an adult's needs, goals, habits, values, and self concept." Houle (1977:11) elaborates on the need for external degree programs by indicating that "education should be fitted to the concerns and lifestyle of the mature student who is active in the normal affairs of adulthood." Nova University's regional students are all employed full-time, most have families, are involved with community affairs, and

in general they are very busy people. Therefore, the Nova University field-based degree program is ideal for them. Kidd (1973:121) suggests that continued learning among adults "depends upon the achievement of satisfaction." Kidd (1973:121) further states that "the satisfaction must be felt in terms of the learner's own expectations and needs." The de-isolation strategies proposed in the Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations section aim at satisfying the Nova regional students by meeting their stated needs.

PROCEDURES

Definition of Population

The initial survey population consisted of Nova University Programs for Higher Education regional cluster students (N = 29). Charles Collins, Regional Cluster Coordinator, was sent a detailed letter describing the intended regional cluster de-isolation project. A copy of the survey was also enclosed and his personal feedback was encouraged (See Appendix F). The second surveyed population consisted of South Florida local cluster students currently registered for the Societal Factors Affecting Education seminar (N = 16). George M. Barton, Director of Instruction, Programs for Higher Education, facilitated the local cluster survey dissemination with George Mehallis, South Florida local cluster coordinator and Guerin Fischer, seminar instructor (See Appendix C and Appendix D).

Collection of Data

The initial "Regional Cluster De-Isolation Project Survey" and cover letter was developed and sent to regional cluster students on August 14, 1986 (See Appendix A and Appendix B). A second survey and cover letter were sent to the same group on October 21, 1986 so as to insure an adequate return rate and to gather additional comments (See

Appendix E). A letter from a regional student (Appendix G) portrays how difficult it was for him, timewise, just to complete the survey. A third survey was sent to all South Florida local cluster students who were registered for the Societal Factors Affecting Education seminar.

The survey instrument consisted of four open-ended questions and was identical for both the regional and local clusters except for the words "regional" and "local." The appropriate descriptive word was used on the survey sent to each cluster. The survey instrument was reviewed by the Programs for Higher Education Director of Instruction to insure validity. The purpose of the survey was to collect information on:

1. the needs of regional (local) students
2. possible strategies to meet those needs and
3. specific recommendations for inclusion in the regional (local) cluster "Orientation Manual."

On August 14, 1986, twenty-nine surveys were sent out by U.S. mail to the Programs for Higher Education regional students and one survey was sent to the cluster coordinator. Included with the survey was a cover letter and a self-addressed, stamped envelope (See Appendixes A, B, and C). The regional cluster students were instructed to return the surveys to the Programs for Higher Education office by September 15, 1986. On October 21, 1986 twenty-nine additional surveys, the old cover letter, a new cover letter and self-addressed, stamped envelopes were sent to

the same group. On November 5, 1986, sixteen surveys, the original cover letter, and a letter from George M. Barton were sent to the South Florida local cluster students. They were informed of the research project and asked to complete the survey as it related to their concerns as local cluster students. They were instructed to bring the completed survey to their next cluster meeting where they were collected.

Assumptions and Limitations

Since the de-isolation project survey instruments were designed to measure the opinions of regional and local cluster students, it was assumed that the data collected would reflect the attitudes of each group. It was assumed that the information provided in the cover letter to each regional and local cluster student was understood. It was also assumed that the open-ended questions comprising the survey instruments were unambiguous to those completing them. Another assumption made was that the 24 completed regional student surveys were representative of the approximately 30 regional students. Likewise, it was assumed that the nine completed local cluster student surveys were representative of the 16 students registered in the South Florida local cluster Societal Factors Affecting Education seminar. Finally, it was assumed tht the survey results of both groups would be meaningful so that inferences could be made about all current and future regional and local cluster students.

One possible limitation of the investigation was the relatively small local cluster survey return rate (n = 9). It is possible that inferences made to the national local clusters as a whole will be less than accurate. Another possible limitation of the study would be the question of how seriously and how carefully did the respondents answer the survey. Best (1981:180) suggests that the process of inferring attitude from expressed opinion has several limitations

> People may conceal their attitudes and express socially acceptable opinions. They may not really know how they feel about a social issue; they may never have given the idea serious consideration. People may be unaware of their attitude about a situation in the abstract. Until confronted wih a real situation, they may be unable to predict their reaction or behavior.

Best (1981:180) further states that

> Even though there is no sure method of describing and measuring attitude, the description and measurement of opinion, in many instances, may be closely related to people's real feelings or attitudes.

Definition of Terms

There are a number of terms and corresponding definitions listed below that will assist the reader in understanding the various aspects of the Nova University Programs for Higher Education field-based Ed.D. degree program, etc.

Attitude: For the purpose of this paper, the measurement of attitude is an approximation of a person's or a group's expressed opinions or feelings about something. The American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition

(1985:141) defines attitude as "a state of mind or feeling with regard to some matter."

Cluster Coordinator: "This person is the liaison between the cluster (local or regional) and the central staff. The coordinator has academic responsibilities as well as housekeeping chores" (Self Study 1983-85:314).

Clusters: All Programs for Higher Education students are organized into groups called local or regional clusters. "Clusters provide the vehicle through which instruction and other services are provided to students" (Nova University Programs for Higher Education 1986-87 Catalog:2).

Core Seminars: "Core seminars are those seminars that are required in each specialization area" (Self Study 1983-1985:314).

De-Isolation Strategies: Methods and techniques proposed to reduce the feeling of isolation among regional and/or local cluster students.

External Degree: "An external degree is one awarded to an individual on the basis of some program of preparation (devised either by himself or by an educational institution) which is not centered on traditional patterns of residential collegiate or university study (Houle, 1973:14-15).

Non-traditional doctoral program: "Non-traditional doctoral program implies the primacy of student interests; the utilization of many modes for learning; the de-emphasis of time, space, and courses in favor of competence and performance" (Soles, 1977:4).

Specialization Seminars: "These are seminars especially designed and required in each of the three specialization areas" (Self Study 1983-85:315).

Summer Institute: "Each summer the Programs for Higher Education holds a summer institute. This is a week-long educational conference where presentations are given by many of the professionals associated with the program. Students are required to attend two summer institutes" (Self Study 1983-1985:315-316).

RESULTS

After many discussions with Nova University Programs for Higher Education administrators, research fellows, cluster coordinator, and regional doctoral students, it was established that there was a need to develop and employ innovative strategies to address the feeling of isolation that regional students were experiencing. As a result of these discussions, a "Regional Cluster De-Isolation Project Survey" was developed and sent to all Programs for Higher Education regional cluster students. A copy of the four open-ended question survey is included in the Appendix.

The first mailing of the survey on August 14, 1986 to the regional cluster students (N = 29) resulted in 16 completed surveys. A second mailing of the same survey to the same group resulted in eight additional completed surveys for a total of 24 completed surveys. The regional cluster survey results are listed below according to the categories that appeared on the survey instrument:

1. Needs of regional students
2. Possible strategies not included in the survey materials
3. Recommendations for Orientation Manual, and
4. Other comments.

A summation of the results of the "Regional Cluster De-Isolation Project Survey" follows:

1. Needs of regional students:
    a. Regional students need to have more personal contact (by phone, letter, or computer) with the cluster coordinator.
    b. Frequent telephone communication which provides answers to questions asked as well as encouragement (An "800" phone number for out-of-state students to call Nova Central would facilitate communication
    c. Regular and timely feedback from Nova faculty and Nova Central staff regarding progress in the program
    d. More access to faculty during on-campus summer sessions
    e. A readily available research associate who is thoroughly familiar with Nova requirements
    f. Lots of specific and current examples of practicum proposals and practicums
    g. A checklist of degree (and/or seminar) requirements and a suggested timeline would be helpful
    h. Some help acquiring books would be appreciated
    i. More access to and communication with practicum and MARP advisors

j. Faster turnaround time on practicum proposals, etc.

2. Possible strategies not included in the survey materials:

a. Add a bi-monthly phone call to each student.

b. Hold a reception for new regional students when they first arrive for the two weeks of summer classes.

c. Access to a group photo of the members of the different clusters would make it easier to establish rapport at the summer institute.

d. Since a list of regional student names is already provided, a brief summary of the person's work responsibilities would be interesting, especially if it were then possible to connect a name with a face from a photo.

e. Have a research associate attend regional cluster meetings so students can meet him/her personally and establish ways to seek help.

f. A mentor program is needed--some super individuals at Nova Central who will take a personal interest in assisting regional students would be helpful (someone to write to or telephone for help and support--a

"hotline" to Programs for Higher Education would be ideal.

g. At the summer institute--have a panel of outstanding and successful Nova students, who have completed all practicums and the MARP and who are willing to share their strategies and methods for completing degree requirements.

h. Teleconferencing could be used to provide a scheduled class or a special help session. Like a conference call, it could link people by audio and enhance the feeling of togetherness. An occasional conference-type call would be very good for morale.

i. A weekend session for second-year students with the cluster coordinator (and/or research associate) to work on practicums would be great.

j. Extend regional site meeting time to address all regional student concerns.

k. Hold regional cluster classes at a school setting with library access.

3. Recommendations for "Orientation Manual":

a. "Tips" for successful time management and goal planning for degree requirement completion could be incorporated into an orientation manual.

b. A suggested year by year timeline could be included. Perhaps two or three possible time lines could be outlined.

c. Suggestions should be included on timely and appropriate ways to communicate with Nova Central staff, administrators, research fellows, cluster coordinator, and research associates (the question, who do you call for different information i.e., questions on research, statistics, etc. could be outlined and included in the manual).

d. Prepare regional students for the two-week class session in Florida by giving them as many details as possible concerning: summer courses, housing, cooking facilities, restaurants, class location, library services, campus facilities, recreational opportunities, etc.

e. Provide names and pictures of lecturers that students are likely to have as instructors in the program.

f. Include not only an orientation to Nova University's Programs for Higher Education and Fort Lauderdale, Florida, but also a segment on "survival skills" for the field-based Ed.D. program.

g. A fill-in checksheet could be included to assist self-monitoring of degree progress.

h. The manual should go beyond listing degree requirements--it could offer specific examples of practicum proposals and perhaps a sample practicum.

i. Provide instructions on Information Retrieval Service (IRS) utilization.

j. Provide information and procedures on how to go about attending classes with local clusters.

k. Include information on relevant sources of financial aid, i.e., loans, GI Bill, research fellowships, etc.

4. Other Comments:

a. The principle problem of the regional cluster seems to involve a lack of regular communication and personal involvement between students, cluster coordinator, administrators, faculty, research associate, and practicum advisors.

b. An ice-breaker scheduled the night before the orientation meeting would enhance group comfort and aid relationship building.

c. The "buddy system" for new students is a good idea.

d. An orientation manual would have been helpful in getting started with the program; even a brief document that would help a new student know what to anticipate in the coursework, as well as what to expect during the on-campus time in July would be very helpful.

e. Cluster coordinators should help to stimulate student motivation.

f. The orientation meeting needs to be improved. The course requirements and study guides should be mailed to each student several weeks prior to the orientation meeting. Then, later at the meeting, the student can ask specific questions about course requirements and be less overwhelmed.

g. Course video tapes could be played at the orientation meeting.

h. It would be helpful if the course lecturers were present during the initial orientation meeting or they could be involved by telephone conference to answer questions.

i. The use of the Nova computer network for support should be explored. More and more students are acquiring terminals and modems.

j. The possibility of tele-conferencing and other on-line computer operations is intriguing.

k. Make sure that information that goes out is accurate.

l. The listed strategies are great, especially the newsletter idea.

The above summation of the "Regional Cluster De-Isolation Project Survey" results will be utilized in the development of practical de-isolation strategies. These strategies will be listed in the Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations section. While the regional student survey was being conducted, a discussion with a former Nova research fellow, Thomas MacFarland, inspired yet another idea. MacFarland suggested that it would be interesting to survey the South Florida local cluster to determine if there were similar feelings of isolation among local cluster students. With the cooperation of George Barton, Director of Instruction, a "Local Cluster De-Isolation Project Survey" was distributed to the South Florida cluster.

The mailing of the "Local Cluster De-Isolation Project Survey" to the South Florida local cluster students (N = 16) resulted in nine completed surveys. The local cluster survey results are listed below according to the categories that appeared on the survey instrument:

1. Needs of local cluster students
2. Possible strategies not included in the survey materials
3. Recommendations for "Orientation Manual", and
4. Other comments.

A summation of the results of the "Local Cluster De-Isolation Project Survey" follows:

1. Needs of local cluster students:
   a. Send an orientation manual to students prior to the first seminar. This would tend to lessen student anxiety.
   b. Provide students with copies of accepted practicum proposals and practicums during the first seminar.
   c. Provide special "help" sessions for local cluster students.
   d. Provide group study opportunities for local cluster students.
   e. Access to a local cluster library with adequate periodicals and books would be helpful to all students.
   f. More informal gatherings would increase morale.
   g. Provide a map with directions to the classroom.
2. Possible strategies not included in the survey materials:
   a. Provide directions from the airport to hotels.
   b. Provide summer institute information at the hotel desk.

3. Recommendations for "Orientation Manual":
    a. Provide general program information.
    b. Provide a listing of the requirements for the completion of the degree.
    c. Provide helpful suggestions for completing degree requirements.
    d. Provide a recent list of accepted practicums and MARPs.
4. Other comments:
    a. Possibly having a contact person on arrival to the area or having someone meet students would be helpful.
    b. The acquisition of textbooks is a difficult process.

The above summation of the "Local Cluster De-Isolation Project Survey" results will be compared with the regional cluster results in the following "Discussion, Implications and Recommendations" section of the paper.

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was primarily conducted to determine the overall needs of the Programs for Higher Education regional cluster students and to develop strategies to meet those needs. Since many of the regional cluster students had verbalized their feeling of isolation to the cluster coordinator, Nova program administrators, and themselves--a search for active strategies to reduce feelings of isolation was begun. In order to determine if local cluster students experienced feelings of isolation similar to regional students, the South Florida local cluster was surveyed also.

A content analysis of the "Regional Cluster De-Isolation Project Survey" resulted in the finding that most regional cluster students felt somewhat isolated from Nova University faculty, program administrators, cluster coordinator, practicum advisors, and fellow students. The general consensus was that there was not enough regular and timely communication between all of the above mentioned people. When regional students have questions and need information to begin or complete assignments or original research--they need to have an organized support roster of Nova faculty and staff to call on, especially at those times when the regional cluster coordinator is unavailable. If the busy regional students are deprived of timely guidance and feedback from Nova professionals, it is probable that student

frustration will increase. In addition, the time-line anticipated for students to complete the degree program will be unfortunately extended.

A content analysis of the South Florida "Local Cluster De-Isolation Project Survey" resulted in a request for the provision of more information related to the degree program. Examples of practicums and proposals were requested in addition to special help sessions, an adequate local cluster library and an orientation manual.

Both the regional and local cluster students shared common needs for the following: assistance in acquiring textbooks, a desire to be sent samples of practicums and proposals, "tips" on strategies and techniques for successfully completing the Ed.D. program, a suggested time line to complete degree requirements, an orientation manual that would include summer institute and other related costs and information, and informal gatherings among students, faculty, staff and advisors.

Because of the relatively small local cluster survey return rate (n = 9), it was difficult to make realistic inferences about the national local student cluster population. However, inferences can be made about present and future regional student clusters with a fair degree of confidence. It could be said that if regional student clusters are to flourish, then they will need more regular communication and feedback about the Ed.D. program in general and their own individual student progress in the program.

In order to develop appropriate de-isolation strategy recommendations for regional cluster students, a meeting was convened to review the survey results with Ross Moreton, Director of Nova University Programs for Higher Education; Elizabeth Poliner, Director of Information Retrieval Services and Margaret Kibbee, Programs for Higher Education Research Fellow. Listed below are the regional student cluster de-isolation recommendations that were thought to have merit:

1. A newsletter could be published bi-monthly by the Nova Central staff. The newsletter could contain updates on program information, news on Nova Central research, glimpses of approved practicums, summer institute information, positive reinforcements--i.e., "student of the month," etc.

2. Some high quality practicums and practicum proposals could be sent to all regional students to serve as examples.

3. A "buddy system" could be organized--some second year students could volunteer to assist new regional students for guidance and encouragement.

4. An "Orientation Manual" could be developed specifically for regional students. The manual could include detailed information about the two weeks of classes prior to the summer institute, campus facilities, housing, food services, recreation opportunities in the general

vicinity, information on acquiring textbooks, and helpful tips for completing Ed.D. requirements in a timely fashion.

5. A video tape of "previews" of each required course and specialization seminar could be developed, condensed into a single tape and mailed upon student request for a five-day loan.

6. Faster turnaround time on practicum proposals, etc. could be explored.

7. A readily available research associate who is thoroughly familiar with Nova requirements could be hired.

8. More personal contact (by phone, letter, or computer) with the cluster coordinator could be increased. An "800" phone number could be made available for out-of-state students to facilitate Nova Central communication.

9. A checklist of degree requirements and a suggested time line for two, three, and four year degree completion goals could be made available to Programs for Higher Education students.

10. Increase student access to faculty during on-campus summer sessions.

11. Increase student access to practicum and MARP advisors telephonically and in person.

12. Regular and timely feedback from Nova faculty regarding course assignments.

13. Hold a reception for new regional students the evening prior to the initial orientation meeting and when they first arrive for the two weeks of summer classes.

14. Since a list of regional student names is already provided, add a brief summary of the person's work responsibilities.

15. A mentor program could be developed--some super individuals at Nova Central that would take a personal interest in assisting regional students, would be an asset to the program.

16. At the summer institute--have a panel of outstanding and successful Nova students, who have completed all practicums and MARP, and who are willing to share their strategies and methods for completing Nova degree requirements.

17. Teleconferencing could be utilized to provide a scheduled class or a special help session. An occasional conference-type call would tend to boost morale.

18. A weekend session for second year students could be scheduled with the cluster coordinator and the research associate to work on practicums.

19. The course requirements and study guides could be mailed to each new student several weeks prior to the initial orientation meeting. This would help new students to feel less overwhelmed and would allow them to ask more pertinent questions at the meeting.

20. If course lecturers were not present during the initial orientation meeting, they could be available by telephone conference to answer student questions.

21. Provide names and pictures of lecturers that students are likely to have as instructors in the program.

22. The use of the Nova computer network for support should be explored. More and more students are acquiring terminals and modems.

23. Provide a Programs for Higher Education resource personnel list. Suggestions should be included on timely and appropriate ways to communicate with Nova Central staff, administrators, research fellows, cluster coordinator, practicum advisors, and research associate. This list could outline who to call for various types of information.

The Nova University Programs for Higher Education regional cluster has flourished since it began in 1985. Enrollments have increased steadily and the prospects for continued growth are optimistic. In spite of the success of the new regional cluster concept, there are several concerns that demand attention. The vastness of geographic territory (the United States and soon other countries) that the regional cluster encompasses has a direct relationship to the feeling of isolation that students experience. Because regional students live literally all over the United States and great travel distances are involved, there are fewer scheduled cluster meetings compared to local clusters. Therefore, cluster communication is somewhat hampered. The above regional cluster de-isolation recommendations should help alleviate the feelings of isolation experienced by regional students.

Since regular on-going evaluation is a main-stay of all aspects of the Programs for Higher Education Ed.D. degree program, improvements are sought and incorporated continually. Even the proposed regional cluster de-isolation recommendations, once implemented, will be evaluated to determine their impact on reducing student perceived isolation. Because the evaluation process is student-centered, it is likely that overall regional student satisfaction will continue to be high.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

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APPENDIX A

REGIONAL CLUSTER COVER LETTER

OF AUGUST 14, 1986

Nova University
CENTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF EDUCATION
Programs for Higher Education
3301 College Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33314 • 305/475-7380

MEMORANDUM

TO: All Regional Cluster Students

FROM: Jim Kole, Research Assistant (Denver Regional Cluster)

DATE: August 14, 1986

SUBJECT: 1. Regional Cluster "De-isolation" Project
2. Orientation Manual Suggestions

The purpose of this memorandum is to inform you of two current projects underway and to seek your advice and input regarding "de-isolation" strategies and your suggestions for items to be included in an Orientation Manual for the regional clusters.

Drs. Barton, Moreton and Collins have had discussions concerning the regional students' general feeling of isolation. They have suggested that I take on this problem as a practicum. As a first step I have been asked to conduct a needs assessment of all regional students in the Nova Higher Education doctoral program. The goal is to determine what the needs of regional students are and to meet those needs. Because of the success of the regional cluster concept under the leadership of Dr. Collins, enrollment is growing. As growth continues, it will be imperative to have increased communication between Nova Central, cluster coordinator and students all over the country (world).

Local clusters across the country meet regularly throughout the year and provide numerous opportunities for students, coordinators, local research associates and instructors to communicate and share ideas, and most importantly, to give and receive positive and constructive reinforcement. In addition, local clusters may arrange special "help" sessions for their students regarding practicums and MARPs. Given that the regional clusters are not organized like local clusters, the challenge remains to meet the diversified needs of regional students.

As a result of initial discussions with Drs. Barton, Moreton, Collins and continuing discussions with them, Ted Switzer, other regional students and myself a preliminary list of possible "de-isolation" strategies have been developed and follow below. Please review this list and feel free to make revisions and suggestions for additional strategies. You, the regional student, know your problems and concerns better than anyone else in the Nova Program. This is your opportunity to help close the gap between a perceived lack of services and the ideal services you desire.

Preliminary "De-isolation" Strategies

1. A newsletter should be published each month by the Nova Central staff. The newsletter would contain updates on program information, news about Nova Central, the University, glimpses of approved practicums, achievements of students, and perhaps some mini-self-help programs/suggestions, etc.

2. "Top notch" practicum proposals and practicums should be mailed to each regional student.

3. A "buddy system" could be developed--one second year student could be assigned to each new regional student for guidance and encouragement.

4. Make it possible for regional students to attend local cluster meetings if they desire.

5. An "Orientation Manual" should be developed specifically for regional students. The manual could be developed by a regional student/research assistant.

6. Video tapes (as developed) could be mailed upon student request for a three day loan.

7. Electronic online communications for students and instructors with computers and modems could be possible.

8. Create audio cassette tapes of all regional cluster meetings, especially training sessions for use by students.

On the enclosed Regional Cluster "De-isolation" Project Survey form please feel free to brainstorm your ideas. A self-addressed/stamped envelope has been enclosed for your convenience. In addition, if you would like to call me, I can be reached at Nova (305) 475-7349, Monday - Friday 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. **Please make every effort to see that I receive your response no later than September 15, 1986.** We are going to make the program better with your input!

Enclosure

cc: Dr. George Barton
Dr. Ross Moreton
Dr. Charles Collins

APPENDIX B

REGIONAL CLUSTER "DE-ISOLATION"

PROJECT SURVEY

REGIONAL CLUSTER "DE-ISOLATION" PROJECT SURVEY

Purpose: The purpose of this inquiry is to collect information on

1. the needs of regional students
2. possible strategies to meet those needs and
3. specific recommendations for inclusion in the regional cluster "Orientation Manual."

Directions: Please type or write clearly and concisely your answers (to 1, 2, and 3 above) in the corresponding sections below. Feel free to use the back of the page if you run out of room.

1. Needs of regional students:

2. Possible strategies not listed:

3. Recommendations for "Orientation Manual":

4. Other Comments:

I highly value your comments and suggestions regarding the regional "de-isolation" project and proposed orientation manual. I thank you for your cooperation and timely response in advance.

APPENDIX C

SOUTH FLORIDA CLUSTER COVER LETTER

FROM GEORGE M. BARTON

Nova University
CENTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF EDUCATION
Programs for Higher Education
3301 College Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33314 • 305/475-7380

MEMORANDUM

TO: Students in the South Florida Cluster

FROM: George M. Barton

DATE: November 5, 1986

SUBJECT: "De-Isolation" Project

As you may know, we have three regional clusters. They differ from the local clusters such as yours by spending time on campus attending seminars. Also, they only come together as a cluster once each year.

In an effort to serve those students more effectively, it was felt that we should actively work toward the potential students' feelings of isolation. Therefore, a "de-isolation" project was initiated. The enclosed memorandum from Jim Kole was sent to all regional students.

In addition to the possibility of the regional cluster students feeling isolated, there is the possibility of students, like yourselves, in a local cluster having such feelings. Therefore, it was felt that, if you would complete the same survey that the regional students completed, we could determine if there were similar feelings or if they were different because of more personal contact through the year.

Please read the enclosed memorandum that was sent to regional students and complete the Local Cluster "De-Isolation" Project Survey. Bring the completed survey to your next cluster meeting. They will be collected at that time.

Thank you for your cooperation in this. I am certain that this will prove to represent data that will be most valuable in determining some future action.

GMB:bac

Enclosures

cc: Dr. Guerin Fischer
Dr. George Mehallis

APPENDIX D

LOCAL CLUSTER "DE-ISOLATION"

PROJECT SURVEY

LOCAL CLUSTER "DE-ISOLATION" PROJECT SURVEY

Purpose: The purpose of this inquiry is to collect information on

1. the needs of local cluster students
2. possible strategies to meet those needs and
3. specific recommendations for inclusion in the local cluster "Orientation Manual."

Directions: Please type or write clearly and concisely your answers (to 1,2, and 3 above) in the corresponding sections below. Feel free to use the back of the page if you run out of room.

1. Needs of local cluster students:

2. Possible strategies not listed:

3. Recommendations for "Orientation Manual":

4. Other Comments:

I highly value your comments and suggestions regarding the local cluster "de-isolation" project and proposed orientation manual. I thank you for your cooperation and timely response in advance.

APPENDIX E

REGIONAL CLUSTER COVER LETTER

OF OCTOBER 21, 1986

Nova University
CENTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF EDUCATION
Programs for Higher Education
3301 College Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33314 • 305/475-7380

MEMORANDUM

TO: All Regional Cluster Students

FROM: Jim Kole JK, Research Assistant (Denver Regional Cluster)

DATE: October 21, 1986

SUBJECT: Final Request for your Input Regarding:
1. Regional Cluster "De-Isolation" Project
2. Orientation Manual Suggestions

Approximately two months ago the Regional Cluster "De-Isolation" Project Survey was sent to all regional cluster students. As a result of that initial mailing 14 surveys were completed and returned to the Programs for Higher Education office. The mailing of the last survey request occurred at the worst possible time--when you were returning from the 1986 Summer Institute and completing course work, beginning a vacation, preparing for work again, etc.

The purpose of this memorandum is to request your assistance and feedback on the same survey. If you have already returned your survey--thank you. Perhaps additional ideas have come to mind, if so, please feel free to write them down and send them in the enclosed, self-addressed, postage paid envelope. If you have not completed and returned a survey yet, please take the time now to do so. The feedback of all regional students is critical to the development of practical recommendations that can be employed to resolve identified concerns.

Enclosed please find the original cover letter with modified preliminary "de-isolation" strategies and survey.

Please make every effort to respond as soon as possible. Thank you in advance for your reply.

JK:ac

Enclosures

cc: Dr. George Barton
Dr. Ross Moreton
Dr. Charles Collins

Nova University
CENTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF EDUCATION
Programs for Higher Education
3301 College Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33314 • 305/475-7380

MEMORANDUM

TO: All Regional Cluster Students

FROM: Jim Kole, Research Assistant (Denver Regional Cluster)

DATE: August 14, 1986

SUBJECT: 1. Regional Cluster "De-isolation" Project
2. Orientation Manual Suggestions

The purpose of this memorandum is to inform you of two current projects underway and to seek your advice and input regarding "de-isolation" strategies and your suggestions for items to be included in an Orientation Manual for the regional clusters.

Drs. Barton, Moreton and Collins have had discussions concerning the regional students' general feeling of isolation. They have suggested that I take on this problem as a practicum. As a first step I have been asked to conduct a needs assessment of all regional students in the Nova Higher Education doctoral program. The goal is to determine what the needs of regional students are and to meet those needs. Because of the success of the regional cluster concept under the leadership of Dr. Collins, enrollment is growing. As growth continues, it will be imperative to have increased communication between Nova Central, cluster coordinator and students all over the country (world).

Local clusters across the country meet regularly throughout the year and provide numerous opportunities for students, coordinators, local research associates and instructors to communicate and share ideas, and most importantly, to give and receive positive and constructive reinforcement. In addition, local clusters may arrange special "help" sessions for their students regarding practicums and MARPs. Given that the regional clusters are not organized like local clusters, the challenge remains to meet the diversified needs of regional students.

As a result of initial discussions with Drs. Barton, Moreton, Collins and continuing discussions with them, Ted Switzer, other regional students and myself a preliminary list of possible "de-isolation" strategies have been developed and follow below. Please review this list and feel free to make revisions and suggestions for additional strategies. You, the regional student, know your problems and concerns better than anyone else in the Nova Program. This is your opportunity to help close the gap between a perceived lack of services and the ideal services you desire.

Preliminary "De-isolation" Strategies

1. A newsletter should be published each month by the Nova Central staff. The newsletter would contain updates on program information, news about Nova Central, the University, glimpses of approved practicums, achievements of students, and perhaps some mini-self-help programs/suggestions, etc.

2. "Top notch" practicum proposals and practicums should be mailed to each regional student.

3. A "buddy system" could be developed--some second year students could volunteer to assist new regional students for guidance and encouragement.

4. Make it possible for regional students to attend local cluster meetings if they desire.

5. An "Orientation Manual" should be developed specifically for regional students. The manual could include detailed information on unique aspects of the regional program. Information could be provided about the two weeks of classes prior to the summer institute, campus facilities, housing, food services, recreation opportunities, independent learning strategies, etc.

6. Video tapes of "previews" of each required course could be mailed upon student request for a five day loan.

7. Electronic online communications for students and instructors with computers and modems could be possible.

8. Create audio cassette tapes of some regional cluster meetings, especially training sessions for use by interested students.

On the enclosed Regional Cluster "De-isolation" Project Survey form please feel free to brainstorm your ideas. A self-addressed/stamped envelope has been enclosed for your convenience. In addition, if you would like to call me, I can be reached at Nova (305) 475-7349, Monday - Friday 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. **Please make every effort to see that I receive your response no later than September 15, 1986.** We are going to make the program better with your input!

Enclosure

cc: Dr. George Barton
Dr. Ross Moreton
Dr. Charles Collins

APPENDIX F

REGIONAL CLUSTER COORDINATOR COVER

LETTER OF AUGUST 14, 1986

Nova University
CENTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF EDUCATION
Programs for Higher Education
3301 College Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33314 • 305/475-7380

MEMORANDUM

TO: Dr. Charles Collins, Regional Cluster Coordinator

FROM: Jim Kole, Research Assistant JK

DATE: August 14, 1986

SUBJECT: Regional Cluster "De-isolation" Project

Dr. Barton has informed me of the discussion he, Dr. Moreton and you held concerning the regional students' feeling of isolation. He has suggested that I take on this problem as a practicum. As a first step I have been asked to conduct a needs assessment of all regional students in the Nova Higher Education doctoral program. The goal is to discover what the needs of our students are and to actively provide for those needs. Because of the success of the regional cluster concept under your leadership, enrollment is growing. As growth continues, it will be imperative to have increased communication between Nova Central, cluster coordinator and students all over the country (world).

The purpose of this memo is to inform you of the project and to seek your advice and input regarding "de-isolation" strategies for the regional clusters. Local clusters across the country meet regularly throughout the year and provide numerous opportunities for students, coordinators, local research associates and instructors to communicate and share ideas, and most importantly to give and receive constructive reinforcement. In addition, local clusters may arrange special help sessions for their students regarding practicums and MARPs. Given that the regional clusters are not organized like local clusters, the challenge remains to meet the diversified needs of regional students.

As a result of initial discussions with Drs. Barton, Moreton and you and continuing disussions with them, Ted Switzer, other regional students and myself a preliminary list of possible "de-isolation" strategies follow below.

Possible "De-isolation" Strategies

1. A newsletter could be published each month by the Nova Central Staff. The newsletter would contain updates on program information, news on Nova Central research, glimpses of approved practicums, summer institute information, positive re-inforcement--i.e. "student of the month," and perhaps some mini-self-help programs/suggestions, etc.

2. "Top shelf" practicum proposals and practicums could be mailed to each regional student.

3. A "buddy system" could be developed--one second year student could be assigned to each new regional student for guidance and encouragement.

4. Allow regional students to attend local cluster meetings if they desire.

5. An "Orientation Manual" could be developed specifically for regional students. The manual could be drafted by a regional student/research assistant.

6. Video tapes (as developed) could be mailed upon student request for a three day loan.

7. Electronic online communications for students and instructors with computers and modems could be possible.

8. Create audio cassette tapes of all regional cluster meetings, especially training sessions for use by students.

Chuck, please note the attached regional student questionnaire and feel free to make revisions and suggestions, etc. Your comments and suggestions about these and other "de-isolation" strategies will be welcomed and appreciated. Please respond as soon as possible.

Enclosure

cc: Dr. George Barton
Dr. Ross Moreton

APPENDIX G

REGIONAL STUDENT RESPONSE LETTER

1110 Spring Hill Road
Waconia, Minnesota 55387
November 17, 1986

Mr. Jim Kole, Research Assistant
Programs in Higher Education
Nova University
3301 College Avenue
Ft. Lauderdale, Florida 33314

Dear Jim:

Finally I can get to responding to your second plea regarding your questionnaire. I really am sorry for the delay, but this has been an "unreal" fall for me with new responsibilities as department chair. I've gotten behind in a number of areas including this.

Thanks for the microfiche; I haven't had a chance as yet to preview it, but I expect it will prove useful on one or another writing project.

So much time has elapsed since the Summer Institute, and I have had precious little time to devote to study. So it is very difficult to respond thoughtfully to the questions you raise in your letter. I trust this response will count for something even if I cannot offer suggestions not already given by others.

I respond favorably to the "Preliminary 'De-isolation' Strategies" as listed in the second letter. I particularly like the idea of a "buddy system" for new students. I also think an orientation manual would have been helpful in getting started with the program; even a brief document that would help a new student know what to anticipate in the coursework, as well as during the on-campus time in July, would be very helpful.

I don't think I'd find the video-tape previews of too much interest; the one we viewed last winter in Denver with the professors of the Emergence in Higher Ed. was not of any particular help to me.

The idea that intrigues me most is the possibility of conferencing and other online computer operations. I finally got my new computer and modem "up and running," and I'm quite excited about its possibilities! It would be helpful to have a means of directly contacting other regional cluster students.

Again, I'm really sorry to be so overdue in this response. I realize it may be entirely too late to be of any use, but then just consider it a friendly letter!

Will you be in Denver for the Societal Factors course? I am looking forward to getting into that class, as my areas of special interest are in the social sciences.

I hope things are going well for you. My family and I think of Ft. Lauderdale every now and then, particularly now when our weather is turning wintery and cold.

Sincerely,

Dan Carlson

Dan Carlson